



January 5, 2017

Hon. Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee
SD 428
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee
SR 154
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray,

Congratulations on your continued leadership of the Senate HELP Committee in the 115th Congress. On behalf of Common Sense Kids Action, the policy arm of one of America's largest and most trusted national non-profit children's organizations, Common Sense Media, we wish you success this Congress in working to help parents, teachers and other caregivers ensure that America's children have the opportunity to fully participate in all that America has to offer. Common Sense stands ready to assist you and your colleagues in any way to help you achieve this critical goal, including during the consideration of the nominee for the next secretary of education, Ms. Betsy DeVos, and other nominees to the incoming Administration.

As you might know, Common Sense has an uncommon reach into the parent and teacher community as a trusted resource regarding media, technology, education, and other issues that directly affect our kids. With more than 65 million users of our ratings and reviews for parents, more than 325,000 teachers in over 100,000 schools using our award winning digital citizenship curriculum and ed-tech training resources, and with active members in every state using the Common Sense Legislative Ratings tool, Common Sense is committed to making kids America's top priority.

There are, of course, many important issues that you and your colleagues will raise during the consideration of Ms. DeVos, and we know that you have ample information on some of the more prominent ones among them, such as her proposals to use vouchers and school choice and the impact that might have on educational equity, her position on charter schools, or her views on the role of religion in public education. There are other issues that also directly affect the day-to-day learning and the long-term educational success of our nation's school children and we respectfully ask that you and your colleagues raise the following issues with Ms. DeVos as you consider her views and qualifications. As we know you agree, a quality education that is

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available to all children regardless of zip code or background is central to America's identity, success, and standing in the world.

Education Technology and Digital Citizenship

Modern digital technology has clearly transformed every aspect of society and as a result has also placed greater requirements on each succeeding generation to master this technology for every type of work or learning environment. Unfortunately, access to modern technology and training in its use remains extremely uneven in the United States. The disparity in access to broadband at school and at home, to proper devices, and to the training in effective and wise use of digital technology contributes to the overall economic stratification that remains a central problem in America today. There is much that has been done that is laudable but there remains more to do to ensure greater equity in access to technology and effective ed-tech training. With that in mind, we believe it is important to probe Ms. DeVos knowledge of and views on educational technology issues. For example:

- What investments does Ms. DeVos plan to make as Education Secretary regarding education technology in public schools to ensure our children grow up prepared to be leaders at home and abroad in the global economy?
- How will Ms. DeVos promote equity in our public schools in terms of access to the three pillars of education technology -- high-speed connectivity in every classroom, access to modern devices for all kids, and high quality training for students and faculty in the use and integration of technology for learning?
- School leaders play a key role in so many aspects of a school, but no less so than in the effective integration of education technology. What are Ms. DeVos' views on the importance of preparing school leaders, including principals, teachers, and library and media specialists, in the implementation and use of education technology in the classroom, and what role does she believe the Department should play in this effort?
- The U.S. Department of Education's National Education Technology Plan 2016 specifically cites digital citizenship as a key component of education technology in schools, recognizing the rapid spread of social media among students of all ages, including elementary and middle school students, and the potential to use this media for good but for peril, whether in cyberbullying, sexual harassment, security breaches, or intellectual property violations. How does Ms. DeVos believe the Department can help schools meet the goal of ensuring all kids have access to digital citizenship education?
- And finally, learning does not stop at the school door, of course, and many teachers regularly assign homework that must be completed over the Internet. And yet, more than 5 million households with school age children lack high-speed Internet, leading to a homework gap that exacerbates inequality between the digital haves and the digital have-

notes. The E-Rate program has done an excellent job of helping to ensure more schools and libraries are connected. What does Ms. DeVos believe the Department should do to ensure that all school children stay connected whether at school or at home?

Privacy

Making sure that kids are safe is every parent's and teacher's main responsibility. In the digital age, this also means making sure their online data is kept private and secure. Unfortunately, federal laws regarding online privacy for students greatly lag developments in digital recordkeeping and digital applications used by nearly every school in America. Over the past few years, numerous states have taken steps to improve online data privacy and security for students, to varying degrees, through regulation of third party vendors. But the primary federal law regarding the information schools collect and keep on students and their families, FERPA, is admittedly out of date. Technology is increasingly used in schools for educational and administrative purposes. Students use ed-tech apps, search and browse the web, and create online profiles for class and homework assignments. As students do this, they are creating an online footprint that can be stored, tracked, and used by parties other than the student or his or her family. If a student's online educational activity and data are not protected as part of the student's education record, a colossal amount of highly sensitive student information could be left unprotected, able to be released and disclosed without restriction and putting students and families at risk. It is important to know Ms. DeVos' views on student privacy issues. For example:

- What changes to FERPA does Ms. DeVos believe should be made to better protect children and their families in the digital age?
- Does she believe that FERPA needs to be updated to clearly specify that it protects students' online information?
- Does she believe that greater limits should be placed on the sharing of student directory information that is regularly collected and shared by schools today? These directories typically contain information that is considered personally identifiable and sensitive under many other privacy laws and its disclosure would in other circumstances be considered a data breach.
- And does she believe that schools should be required to develop and maintain tighter data breach protocols to limit the collection and storage of personal student information and increase its protection from unauthorized access?

Early Learning

The research on early childhood development makes it clear that what happens in a child's first five years of life is central to their long-term success. Children's brains develop at a dramatic pace during their earliest years, with 80 percent of brain development occurring by the age of 3.

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By the time children enter kindergarten at age 5, up to 70% of the achievement gap seen at age 14 is already present. Various federal, state and local initiatives are focused on expanding access to kids younger than age 5 to high quality early learning opportunities, and some with great success. But clearly more action is needed to ensure that all children, regardless of economic and other backgrounds have the opportunities they need to thrive in school and in life. Please ask Ms. DeVos her views on the role of the Department in promoting greater access to high quality early learning opportunities. For example:

- The national median annual wage for preschool teachers is a little more than half of what kindergarten teachers make, and yet pre-school is a critical early learning experience that helps shape children as they enter the k-12 system. It is well known that these persistently low wages undermine the quality of many pre-school programs. What does Ms. DeVos believe the Department should do to ensure that early learning educators are better compensated for their important work?
- While the Department has jurisdiction over early learning for children with special needs, it does not administer any early learning programs for these children. As a result, in states with no public pre-K programs, there is no venue to support early learning for 3- and 4-year-olds with special needs. What Ms. DeVos believe the Department can do to better serve our youngest learning with special needs?

On behalf of the millions of parents and hundreds of thousands of teachers who rely on Common Sense, thank you very much for your consideration of the issues we have raised and for using your enormous position of authority to stand up for America's most vulnerable citizens, our children, as you consider the nominees to serve in the next Administration.

Sincerely,

/s/

Jim Steyer
Founder and CEO
Common Sense Media

/s/

Danny Weiss
Vice President, Federal Policy
Common Sense Kids Action

Cc: Honorable Members of the Senate HELP Committee